



CHRISTMAS FILMS

Gremlins

Joe Dante on 'Gremlins'

I never happened to believe that *Gremlins* was a movie that scared children. That was a thing that came up when the movie was released, and there were articles in the paper. They had sold it as an *E.T.* clone – people thought they were going to get this soft, cuddly movie, and then they got this scary green monster movie with creatures that blow their noses on the curtains. And parents were somewhat offended. But I never met a kid who didn't like it. I never met a kid who had a nightmare from it. I never met a kid who put his little brother in the microwave! That just didn't happen, because kids are much smarter than adults give them credit for.

That was your second project produced by Steven Spielberg, following Twilight Zone: The Movie. Was he a good collaborator?

He was very filmmaker-friendly. The idea was it was your film: you finished the film, you edited the film, mixed it, cut the negative – then you previewed it. As it goes, Steven was away during the making of *Gremlins*, because he was making another picture. And during that time, it evolved from a horror film to a comedy. When the studio saw it, they didn't get it. Then they went to a preview, and all of a sudden they got it – and decided they wanted to do a lot of merchandising! It was really a B movie – but it became the most successful movie I was ever involved with.

Interview by James Mottram, *Sight & Sound*, October 2010

A contemporary review

In the 'It's a Good Life' episode of the *Twilight Zone* movie, Joe Dante dealt with an immensely talented superkid who uses his psychic powers to reduce the real world to the primary-coloured two-dimensionality of a Tex Avery cartoon. This might even have been read as a pointed caricature of producer Steven Spielberg's deadeningly childish influence over that unfortunate project, an influence all too evident in the tacked-on happy ending to what had been, in Jerome Bixby's original story and Rod Serling's television adaptation, a memorably vicious picture of infantile malice. Dante, at least, has not found his personality subsumed (unlike Tobe Hooper) in that of his co-executive producer. For both Spielberg and Dante, chaos is inherent in modern America, but Spielberg believes in an apparent order which periodically tears itself apart in the face of a real (*Jaws*, *Duel*) or imagined (*1941*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*) threat, while Dante presents a world in perpetual uproar that invariably fails to take any notice of the toothy monsters chewing away at the foundations (*Piranha*, *The Howling*).

Gremlins represents an uneasy synthesis of these subtly different world views. In *1941*, staid Californians become childish cavemen on the least pretext, and in *The Howling*, a group of neurotic werewolves comfortably insinuate themselves into human society. In *Gremlins*, the grown-up characters disappear halfway through the film and are replaced by (rather than turn into) leering, cartoonish caricatures of their former selves. The monster horde, whether brawling and breakdancing in the local bar, indulging in acts of petty mischief with various bits of machinery, or providing a rapt but rowdy

audience for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, are less a fearsome threat than the epitome of unrestrained irresponsibility. A mild *mea culpa* on the parts of Dante and Spielberg can be detected in the last-minute appearance of Keye Luke, who chides the unworthy Peltzers for corrupting the babyish innocence of the mogwai ('You taught him to watch television') and provides a moral homily on man's misuse of nature's gifts that is as deeply felt and half-relevant as any of Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone* afterwords.

The film opens with a series of references, not to the expected world of Jack Arnold's 1950s small towns, but to an earlier tradition of Mid-Western wonderment. The studiobound township of Kingston Falls, lightly iced with artificial snow, a folksy paradise threatened only by the spitefulness of corrupt capitalist Mrs Deagle, is the 80s equivalent of Frank Capra-land. While the televised clip from *It's a Wonderful Life* might be considered superfluous in the context of such an obvious homage, there is a subtler bit of movie consciousness in the use of a portrait of Edward Arnold to stand in for the late Mr Deagle. But references to the recession, like those in the John Landis episode of *Twilight Zone the Movie*, suggest that there are social problems in Kingston Falls which couldn't be solved by James Stewart running down Main Street shouting 'Merry Christmas'.

Dante and Spielberg react to the town's problems by childishly trashing the place, and everything it stands for. In an extraordinary funny/horrific monologue, Kate explains that she has hated Christmas ever since her father was found dead in the chimney dressed as Santa Claus. *Gremlins* also includes a scene in which Father Christmas is throttled by the monsters while two drunken cops refuse to get involved, and contrives to include jibes at such sacred institutions as the YMCA, Walt Disney (among the bat-eared gremlin silhouettes is a dead ringer for Mickey Mouse), Phil Spector's Christmas Album, and Smokey the Bear. The film's most sustained assault on house and home comes when Mrs Peltier, the perfect mother, gets rid of the gremlins in her kitchen with the splattery aid of the blender and the microwave oven, and is promptly attacked by what appears to be a libidinous Christmas tree. If the early sections of the movie, which feature a tiresome running gag about the slapstick malfunctions of Rand Peltzer's inventions, find Dante somewhat lost without the verbal wit of John Sayles, his usual screenwriter, the director comes into his own once the narrative, and the town, has been wrecked.

The Spielbergian side of the film is, of course, represented by the almost insufferably cuddly Gizmo – an eyeball-rolling, furry creation who outdoes even E.T. in special-effects cuteness – and one feels a kind of malicious relief when the evil Stripe and his cohorts take over the film. The central, anarchic section of *Gremlins* is nothing more than a disconnected series of violently comic blackout sketches. The stop/start switches between horror and comedy prevent the film from building to a coherent climax (a problem which also afflicts *Ghostbusters*), and so Spielberg has to reassert himself as Gizmo comes racing to his pal Billy's rescue in a toy car, grinning in imitation of Clark Gable in *To Please a Lady*. However, if *Gremlins* fails as a grown-up story (the inexplicable disappearance of everyone in town once the monsters take over is awkward, and the gremlin life cycle is idiotic), it succeeds admirably as a wide-eyed conflation of the tinsel of Christmas with the gleeful excess of Saturnalia.

Kim Newman, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, December 1984

GREMLINS

Directed by: Joe Dante
©: Warner Bros Inc.
Steven Spielberg *presents*
an Amblin Entertainment *presentation*
Executive Producers: Steven Spielberg,
Frank Marshall, Kathleen Kennedy
Produced by: Michael Finnell
Unit Production Manager: Phil Rawlins
Production Secretary: Karen Shaw
1st Assistant Director: James Quinn
2nd Assistant Director: Carol Green
Script Supervisor: Kenneth Gilbert
Casting: Susan Arnold
Written by: Chris Columbus
Director of Photography: John Hora
Process Photography: Bill Hansard
Camera Operator: Michael Jones
1st Assistant Cameraman: Norman Cattell
2nd Assistant Cameraman: Lex Rawlins
Gaffer: Norman Harris
Key Grip: Richard Moran
Dolly Grip: William G. Kenney
Still Photographer: Ralph Nelson Jr
Matte Paintings: Dream Quest Images, Rocco Gioffre
Special Effects Supervisor: Bob MacDonald Sr
Special Effects Foremen: Bob MacDonald Jr,
Tim Gillette, Ted Shell, David Sosalla,
Robert Secrest, Marghe McMahon, Ralph Miller, Kirk Thatcher
Animation: VCE Inc (Sylmar, CA)
Stop Motion: Fantasy II Film Effects
Edited by: Tina Hirsch
Assistant Editor: Tom Finan
Production Designer: James H. Spencer
Set Designer: William Matthews
Set Decorator: Jackie Carr
Property Master: Marty Wunderlich
Construction Co-ordinator: Michael A. Muscarella
Men’s Costume Supervisors: Norman Burza, Linda Matthews
Make-up Artist: Greg La Cava
Gremlins Created by: Chris Walas
Gizmo/Gremlins Designed/Created/Operated by: Chris Walas Inc
CWI Project Co-ordinator: E. Erik Jenson
CWI Creature Consultant: Jon Berg
Hairstylist: Cheri Ruff
Titles/Opticals: Cinema Research Corporation
Filmed with: Panavision Cameras & Lenses
Colour by: Technicolor
Colour Timer: Robert Raring
Music by: Jerry Goldsmith
Orchestrations: Arthur Morton
Music Editor: Kenneth Hall
Music Recording Mixers: Bruce Botnick, Robert Fernandez
Production Sound Mixer: Ken King
Re-recording Mixers: Bill Varney, Steve Maslow, Kevin O’Connell
Supervising Sound Editors: Richard L. Anderson, Mark Mangini
Dialogue Editor: Stephen Purvis
Special Vocal Effects: Frank Welker, Howie Mandel, Fred Newman,
Mark Dodson, Michael Winslow, Peter Cullen, Bob Berger,
Mike Sheehan, Bob Holt
Foley: John Roesch, Joan Rowe
Stunt Co-ordinator: Terry Leonard
Animal Co-ordinator: Ray Berwick
Filmed at: Universal Studios Hollywood

Cast

Zach Galligan (*Billy Peltzer*)
Phoebe Cates (*Kate Beringer*)
Hoyt Axton (*Randall ‘Rand’ Peltzer*)
Polly Holliday (*Ruby Deagle*)
Frances Lee McCain (*Lynn Peltzer*)
Judge Reinhold (*Gerald Hopkins*)
Dick Miller (*Murray Futterman*)
Glynn Turman (*Roy Hanson*)
Keye Luke (*grandfather, Mr Wing*)
Scott Brady (*Sheriff Frank*)
Corey Feldman (*Pete Fountaine*)
Jonathan Banks (*Deputy Brent*)
Edward Andrews (*Mr Corben*)
John Louie (*Chinese boy*)
Don Steele (*Rockin’ Ricky Rialto*)
Susan Burgess (*little girl*)
Arnie Moore (*Pete’s father*)
Harry Carey Jr (*Mr Anderson*)
Belinda Balaski (*Mrs Harris*)
Chuck Jones (*Mr Jones*)
Kenny Davis (*Dorry*)
John C. Becher (*Doctor Molinaro*)
Gwen Willson (*Mrs Molinaro*)
Jackie Joseph (*Sheila Futterman*)
Joe Brooks (*Dave Meyers, ‘Santa’*)
Jim McKrell (*Lew Landers, WDHB-TV reporter*)
Dow Elson (*man on street*)
Daniel Llewelyn (*hungry Harris child*)
Lois Foraker (*bank teller*)
Nick Katt, Tracy Wells (*schoolchildren*)
Mushroom (*Barney*)

uncredited
Howie Mandel (*voice of Gizmo*)
Frank Welker (*voice of Stripe/Mogwai/Gremlins*)
Fred Newman, Mark Dodson, Michael Winslow, Peter Cullen, Bob Berger,
Mike Sheehan, Bob Holt (*voices of Mogwai/Gremlins*)
Jerry Goldsmith (*man in telephone booth*)
Robby the Robot (*Robby the robot*)
Marvin Miller (*voice of Robby the robot*)
William Schallert (*Father Bartlett*)
Steven Spielberg (*man in electric wheelchair*)
Kenneth Tobey (*Mobil gas station attendant*)

USA 1984©
106 mins

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